A Philosophy Of Christian Librarianship

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ABSTRACT

While a number of Christian librarians have explored the implications of the Christian world view for particular issues in library practice, few have attempted to develop a thoroughgoing philosophy of Christian librarianship. Those who have done so have generally failed to center their proposals around the Christian view of truth. The knowability, objectivity, unity, practicality, and spirituality of truth should impact the way librarians at Christian colleges carry out major library functions, including collection development, reference services, bibliographic instruction, research and publication, and management.

In recent decades evangelical scholars have made significant strides toward the goal of integrating the Christian faith with their respective disciplines. High levels of integration have been achieved in fields of study as diverse as education, psychology, business, biology, history, philosophy, literature, and the arts. Numerous books and articles have been published that approach these disciplines from a Christian perspective. However, there remain some disciplines that so far have received inadequate attention from Christian scholars. Library science is one such discipline.

Relatively little has been written to discuss what it means to be a librarian who exhibits devotion to Christ through his or her profession.[1] Ray Doerksen frames the question well when he asks, "What, if anything, makes Christian librarianship different from that practiced in the rest of the world? In other words, is there a Christian philosophy of librarianship?"[2] It is the purpose of this article to propose such a philosophy for application in Christian institutions of higher education.

REASONS FOR THE LACK OF INTEGRATION

It is fitting to ask why Christian librarians, many of whom view their work more as a calling than a profession,[3] have failed to explore the philosophical ideals of their vocation. This deficiency admits several possible explanations. First, many scholars view librarianship as a complex of technical skills. Not surprisingly, they regard library science to be less than a bona fide academic discipline. Their logic implies that just as monks bake bread the same way as the rest of the world, so Christian librarians carry out their work much as other librarians do.[4] Thus there may be little expectation that Christian librarians should forge their own professional identity.

A second reason for the lack of Christian integration is the fact that library science is a relatively young field of study. The scientific study of librarianship emerged along with the modern library toward the end of the nineteenth century. Compared to the ancient origin of other academic disciplines, such as philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and law, the emergence of library science is a recent phenomenon. Therefore, Christian librarians have had relatively little time

to assess the relationship of their discipline to the Christian world view.

Third, the library profession at large appears not to perceive the importance of defining the theoretical underpinnings of its work. Michael Buckland has noted that librarians have historically taken little interest in the formulation of a philosophy of librarianship.[5] The need for this kind of intellectual pursuit is still not widely understood.[6] The aversion that many non-Christian librarians have to developing a philosophy of the profession seems to extend to Christian librarians as well.

Fourth, Christian librarians have focused their research on practical topics rather than on the theory that underlies them. This is reflective of a trend in the library literature at large. Thus Christian librarians are more likely to write about how to implement technology in their libraries than to expound on the values that ought to characterize their work.

Finally, there are not many forums where the philosophy of Christian librarianship might be discussed. Many Christian library associations exist to serve the needs of congregational libraries by providing professional guidance to volunteers who often have no background in library science.[7] Examples of library associations that serve church media centers include the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Librarians, the Church and Synagogue Library Association, the Evangelical Church Library Association, and the Lutheran Church Library Association. Given the constituencies that they serve, these organizations need to give high priority to pragmatic issues and thus cannot be expected to contribute significantly to philosophical discussions.

At the other end of the spectrum one finds the American Theological Library Association (ATLA), a fairly large organization of library professionals who work in theological seminaries around the world.[8] While ATLA's scholarly character is probably beyond question, the organization serves a constituency that includes both conser-

vative and liberal Protestants, Roman Catholics, and members of non-Christian faiths. It would be unreasonable, therefore, to expect ATLA to develop an evangelical Christian philosophy of librarianship.[9]

While a discussion of authentic Christian librarianship is foreign to the mission of ATLA and the various church library associations, there are several organizations that exist to help Christian librarians observe professional standards while honoring their religious convictions. Such groups include the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL),[10] the Catholic Library Association (CLA),[11] the Christian Librarians' Network (CLN),[12] the Fellowship of Christian Librarians and Information Specialists (FOCLIS),[13] the Librarians' Christian Fellowship (LCF),[14] and the Southern Baptist Library Association (SBLA).[15] Most integration in Christian librarianship has taken place under the auspices of these organizations.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Significant attempts to define the essence of Christian librarianship are listed in the following paragraphs. Attention will be given first to works that discuss the implications of biblical teaching for specific aspects of librarianship.

It is doubtless that the principles of the Christian faith can give direction to a variety of discussions in librarianship. In addition, there are areas where the Christian world view challenges accepted standards of library practice. Christian librarians and other Christian scholars have offered insight on a number of such issues, including ethics of librarianship,[16] librarianship and culture,[17] censorship and intellectual freedom,[18] Sunday opening of public libraries,[19] professionalism,[20] trade unions in librarianship,[21] freedom of access to public libraries,[22] access to Christian books in public libraries,[23] values in children's literature,[24] and ethics of information technology.[25]

All of these writers have helped to explore the implications of the Christian world view for particular issues in library practice. While they have made valuable contributions in these areas, they have not attempted to develop a thoroughgoing philosophy of Christian librarianship. In fact, only a handful of authors have ventured to do so. In the following paragraphs, seven proposed philosophies will be summarized and critiqued.

Alfreda Hanna has proposed that the dominant trait of Christian librarianship should be professional excellence. She observes that excellence honors not only biblical teaching but also the work ethic that has been a tradition of Protestant Christianity for centuries.[26] While it is true that genuine Christian discipleship demands service to God to the best of one's ability, it does not follow that professional excellence is the essence of Christian librarianship. As Elizabeth Irish has noted, there are times when professional ethics come into conflict with Christian ethics.[27] Therefore, one cannot define excellence as a Christian librarian strictly in terms of professional competence.[28] In addition, it seems that there is more to being a Christian librarian than simply exhibiting professionalism. Christian librarianship worthy of the name must involve the integration of one's Christian beliefs and values with the highest ideals of library service.

David Pullinger has proposed a philosophy of Christian librarianship that confronts the consumerism and impoverished access that plague much of the contemporary library scene.[29] The Christian alternative, he says, is built around the concept of community as modeled by the New Testament church. The early Christians shared all their possessions and served one another's needs. Christian librarians in the postmodern world should observe the same values, striving for more effective intellectual access—and equality of physical access—to information.[30] While the notion of sharing is certainly useful to Christian

librarianship, it is questionable whether it should be considered its overarching philosophical ideal. In addition, sharing does not appear to be a uniquely Christian vision; many non-Christian librarians consider resource-sharing to be a key to library success. Thus Pullinger's model, while containing useful elements, does not provide a

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broad-based philosophical understanding of Christian librarianship.

Gwenville Miller has suggested that authentically Christian libraries distinguish themselves from their secular counterparts by upholding the values of service and stewardship. In practice, says Miller, they focus more on developing and maintaining good relationships than on building and storing outstanding collections. [31] There can be little doubt that Christian librarians should view their work as a means of service to others (and, ultimately, to Christ). However, the same can be said of Christians in any occupation. Therefore, while an attitude of responsible service is necessary to a Christian philosophy of librarianship, it must be asked whether this is the sum total of the Christian librarian's spiritual responsibility. In the opinion of this author, this question must be answered negatively.

John Wilcox has proposed a philosophy of Catholic librarianship. He sees Catholic librarians as ideally fulfilling three roles: "(1) establishing and/or enhancing a distinctively Catholic ethos in Catholic education, (2) collaborating in the enrichment of the Catholic heritage preserved in Catholic libraries, and (3) developing Catholic identity as we approach the third millennium."[32] Though Wilcox addresses Catholics, his insights are valuable to a wider audience. First, he recognizes the distinctive character of Christian librarianship. Second, he perceives that Christian librarianship is intrinsically tied to the

enterprise of Christian education.

Donald Davis, Jr., and John Tucker have written a pamphlet entitled *The Master We Serve: The Call of the Christian Librarian to the Secular Workplace*. As implied by its subtitle, this essay is directed to Christian librarians who work in non-Christian academic settings. The authors contend that through the practice of virtue in the workplace, Christians can exercise influence for the cause of Christ. They emphasize several biblical principles that outline the ideals of Christian librarianship, including the dignity of human work, the role of work as a vehicle for service to Christ, and the duty of humble service to others. [33] They see the potential for Christian influence to occur in relationships of mentoring, counseling, affirmation, and interaction.[34] In the opinion of the author, Davis and Tucker have produced a thorough and intelligible integration of Christian faith and library professionalism for application in the secular institution. However, there is much more to be said regarding librarianship—and indeed the possibility of purer integration—in the Christian college or university.

John Trotti has reflected on the meaning of librarianship in the Christian seminary. He declares unambiguously his belief that theological librarianship is a genuine form of ministry: "I wish to share with you my philosophy—no, better my theology—of librarianship and the role of the library in theological education. Far from having left the ministry, I conceive of my work and that of my staff as a ministry as well as an aid in multiple future ministries."[35] In keeping with this conviction, he espouses the view that Christian librarians must necessarily focus on the people they serve.[36] Thus Christian librarianship worthy of

the name is less a matter of managing things and more a matter of interacting with people. This conception of Christian librarianship is a step in the right direction.

The approaches to Christian librarianship cited above provide useful platforms for discussion but leave unfulfilled the quest for a thorough philosophical integration of Christianity and academic librarianship. In particular, they fail to take account of the Christian view of truth. Because the apprehension of truth is the highest concern of the Christian college and university, it seems imperative that the Christian academic librarian's work be firmly grounded in a proper conception of it. To the author's knowledge, the only writer who has developed a Christian philosophy of librarianship on the basis of this assumption is Stanford Terhune.[37]

Terhune describes the philosophical vacuum in which many libraries operate. He asserts that the role of the Christian college library is to enable students to become lifelong Christian thinkers.[38] In pursuit of this goal, Christian librarians should collect resources that make possible the integration of faith and learning; provide reference service that assists in the conduct of research; and inculcate high ethical standards in the use of libraries and information.

THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY AS AN EDUCATIONAL AGENCY

Some professors, administrators, and librarians tend to view the campus library primarily as an administrative unit, a sort of "service bureau."[40] If this perception of academic librarianship is accurate, then librarians' view of truth is unimportant, for they are little more than cogs in a bureaucratic machine. On the other hand, if the academic library is considered an active party in the educational process, its professionals are educators and, in the Christian institution, should share the faculty's convictions concerning truth.

There is a growing awareness among academic librarians that their work is

intrinsically tied to the educational purposes for which their parent institutions exist. On many campuses, librarians are recognized as faculty along with professors and researchers. For several decades librarians have been assuming an active role in the education of students, focusing particularly on teaching information literacy skills.[41] Many instructors, librarians, and administrators are now awakening to the fact that the library is (or at least should be) an equal partner with the classroom in the process of education.

This observation is as true of theological libraries as it is of research libraries. Earle Hilgert and Elvire Hilgert state that "as a member of an educational troika, the [theological] library is an equal partner with classroom and field and shares mutually in the task of forwarding the institution toward its goals. . . . Thus the service which the library is committed to give derives from its own position of mutually supportive partnership."[42] Paul Schrodt echoes this view of the theological library: "There is then an inextricable link between the classroom and the library. The assumption of this is that education does not . . . take place in the classroom alone. The library provides an essential context where the work of education, begun in the classroom, is completed."[43]

The view of the library as a partner in education has been accepted, at least in theory, by accreditation agencies. The American Association of Theological Schools issued the following statement in 1954:

> The ideal library is the study center of the school. It concerns itself with the effectiveness of the educational program of the school; indeed, it is a creative resource in the implementation of such a program. It is a colleague of the classroom. Beyond its capacity in serving as strictly an educational tool, the library as an integral part of the total program of the school is also concerned with the fullest personal development of the Christian worker.[44]

Similar statements have been adopted by other accrediting associations, each emphasizing the educational nature of the librarian's work.[45] A growing consensus says that academic librarians do more than perform technical or administrative tasks—they are essential to the work of education. If librarians are truly educators, then Christian librarians should espouse a distinctly Christian philosophy of education. Terhune reflects this thought when he states that "the pattern of library service in a Christian college is intimately linked with a focused pattern of thought about Christian liberal education."[46]

A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Many Christian scholars have attempted to identify the distinctive elements of a Christian education.[47] Though their perspectives are by no means unanimous, they have much in common. The following paragraphs summarize five principles of Christian education on which most evangelical authors are agreed. All are related to the concept of truth, which, as stated earlier, is the primary focus of Christian education.

First, a truly Christian education presupposes the *knowability* of truth. The Christian student does not have to wonder whether it is possible to discover truth. It is certain that truth can be apprehended because God has revealed it to mankind. Arthur Holmes explains this as follows: "The truth about the physical order is known perfectly to him, the truth about humankind and society, and the truth about everything we ever wondered about in our most perplexed moments. The early church fathers summed this up in what has become a guidepost for Christian scholars ever since—*all truth is God's truth, wherever it be found*."[48] Research and study have dignity in that they are means of discovering truth that God has made known.

Second, a Christian education assumes the *objectivity* of truth. Since God is the Revealer of all truth, truth is grounded in his Person. It follows that

truth is absolute—that is, it is true for all people, for all cultures, for all time. It should be noted that while truth itself is absolute, human interpretations of it are subject to error. D. A. Carson outlines this distinction: "Our knowing is never atemporal or acultural but is inevitably temporally and culturally located; our knowing is often distorted by moral and intellectual failures. . . . Nevertheless, we may know some objectively true things truly, even if never exhaustively."[49] Thus the Christian view of truth balances the objectivity of divine revelation with the subjectivity of human interpretation.

Third, a Christian education propounds the *unity* of truth. In Scripture and in nature God has provided two distinct forms of revelation. These are to be seen as complementary rather than contradictory. David Beck comments: "This view that all truth is consistent has far-reaching implications for our research and teaching. It means that when correct results are obtained in any two disciplines, they will always complement each other. This is not only true of biology and psychology, business and ethics, but also of Bible and geology."[50] Christian scholars seek to reconcile data from special and general revelation, knowing that when properly understood, they will yield a unified, consistent reflection of reality.

Fourth, a Christian education espouses the *practicality* of truth. Truth is not an abstract concept that is unrelated to everyday life. On the contrary, it has consequences for every aspect of human existence. Carl F. H. Henry explains this well:

> A comprehensive world-life view will embrace not only isolated consequences but will bear on the whole of existence and life and supply the presuppositions upon which an orderly and consistent Christian involvement can be based. Just as the Enlightenment in its revolt against biblical theism sought to explain law, religion, science, ethics, and all aspects of culture

without reference to miraculous revelation and redemption, so Christian supernaturalism must bring into its purview every sphere of reality and activity.[51]

Fifth, a Christian education values the *spirituality* of truth. The search for truth should never be undertaken for its own sake. In fact, as D. A. Carson notes, "knowledge is never an end in itself: that would be idolatry."[52] Rather, for the Christian, intellectual activity is sacred; it is a means of demonstrating one's love for God.

These five assumptions concerning the nature of truth outline the parameters of a theistic view of the world. As such they define Christian education's primary aim: to train students to love and serve God with all their heart, soul, strength, and mind. If the Christian college exists to promote learning that is consistent with biblical theism, it is fitting to ask how the Christian academic library can contribute to the fulfillment of this unique role. At first glance it might appear that libraries have little to contribute to the advancement of a world view. However, since much of their work is educational in nature, Christian academic librarians can play a significant part in the process whereby students develop their view of life.

INTEGRATION INTO THE FUNCTIONS OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIANSHIP

In the judgment of the author, the Christian library's duty to advance a view of life that is based on divine revelation affects not so much what the library does as how it does what it does. In other words, the Christian college library should be involved in the same activities as any other academic library, but should engage in them in different ways. Christian librarians need to carry out their major duties in ways that are congruent with their view of truth. The following paragraphs discuss the implications of biblical theism for five functions of librarianship.

Collection development in the academic library is largely an educational task. Care must be taken to represent multiple subject areas in a balanced manner. Coverage must be provided for a broad range of curricular interests.[53] The theistic world view impinges significantly on this task. According to James Sauer, "it requires that Christian librarians . . . take the lead in integrating Bible truth in every area of life."[54] The Christian academic library has the duty to collect not only works of theology and biblical interpretation, but also works which seek to ascertain truth revealed outside the Bible. The faculty and students of a Christian college are to assess, integrate, and reconcile insights from both natural and biblical realms. Libraries should facilitate such activities. In the field of political science, for example, users should find works reflecting biblical and theological approaches to the subject matter. They should find others exhibiting an extra-biblical perspective. This pattern should be repeated in every discipline that touches an institution's curriculum.

It should be noted that biblical and natural forms of revelation are not to be viewed as sacred and secular, though one may be tempted to refer to them in such terms. The theistic framework assumes that all truth comes from God; therefore, nothing true can be secular. A book that makes no reference to the Bible is not necessarily anti-theistic. Rather, to the extent that its content corresponds to revealed reality, it is true, sacred, and glorifying to God. Thus the Christian librarian has a duty to make available sources that will enable researchers to form accurate views of relevant subjects. This requires access to a wide variety of literature, including much that is not specifically Christian.

Some members of a Christian college community might be opposed to filling the library's stacks with books that fail to include God in the pursuit of truth. James Johnson addresses this issue:

> The obligation to engage others in the pursuit of knowledge and truth impacts the academic library significantly, since a major function of the library is to document the discoveries and viewpoints of those who are pursuing knowledge in the fields of study and topics of concern at the college. When a college community understands its library collection primarily as documentation, there is relatively little pressure for removal of materials because they are objectionable.[55]

While there are likely some limits as to the kinds of materials a Christian library should acquire, the library should be expected to offer its faculty and students a wide spectrum of views on relevant topics. Christian librarians must build their collections so that researchers can develop their thinking within the framework of biblical theism. Terhune summarizes this thought by stating that "it is as the Christian student struggles with the intellectual content contained in library resources that he is able to develop an integration of his faith and learning."[56]

A second area of librarianship affected by the Christian world view is that of *reference services*. Reference services in the academic library constitute a legitimate educational activity. Earle Hilgert and Elvire Hilgert explain that "the librarian who is genuinely a partner with classroom and field based teachers will understand him/herself as engaged more broadly than simply in telling students 'where they can find what they're looking for.'" Further, they observe "that the librarian who is content simply 'to wait

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for the next customer' likely spends much of his/her time in activities not representative of genuine educational involvement. The librarian-educator, on the other hand, must carry out an aggressive program of reaching out to users."[57]

At their best, reference services can play a significant part in furthering an academic institution's educational objectives. By helping library users locate and assimilate information, reference personnel make research possible. Because reference interactions are educational encounters, Christian librarians should see them as opportunities to promote the theistic world view. They should use such occasions to impress upon their patrons the necessity of conducting thorough Christian scholarship, including the integration of insights from general and special revelation. In Terhune's words, the Christian librarian has a duty "to teach the student how to undertake, define, and research problems in multi-disciplinary areas from a Christian world-view, leading the student through the steps of integrating his faith and learning."[58]

Third, the Christian view of truth impacts *bibliographic instruction*. As implied by its name, this function of librarianship is educational by its very nature. Bibliographic instruction is a systematic approach to helping students learn how to retrieve, interpret, and use information. Regardless of the methods used, bibliographic instruction sessions should be recognized as appropriate settings for advancing a uniquely Christian view of truth. Bibliographic instruction offers the Christian librarian an opportunity to explain, emphasize, demonstrate, and model the integration of data from biblical and natural revelation.

While Christian librarians should be concerned with effective teaching methods,[59] they should also give thought to the philosophical underpinnings of their instructional activities. They should readily seize the opportunity to set forth the central principle

that distinguishes Christian education: the presupposition of knowable, objective truth as revealed by God in two separate but complementary realms.

Fourth, Christian librarians should promote the Christian world view through *research and publication*. While it may be unreasonable to expect every Christian librarian to write for publication, it seems certain that more should be doing so. There is no better way for librarians to persuade students of the importance of Christian scholarship than for them to be involved in it. Of course, administrators should encourage the process by making financial allowances for research expenses, staffing the library well enough to ensure that professionals have time for research, lending moral support, and providing incentives for library faculty who produce high-quality scholarship.[60]

Finally, Christian librarians' view of truth should be reflected in their *management activities*. The practical nature of truth demands that library administrators express their world view through their management of personnel and resources. For example, Christian librarians should apply truth in the area of organizational behavior, making use of relevant insights from scripture and general revelation. Recognizing their accountability as stewards, they should rely on the best available business information for their decision making. In sum, their professional lives should demonstrate respect for truth wherever it is found.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The ideas set forth in this article are presented as a foundation for discussion, not as the pinnacle of research on the topic. Other writers, with better insights from library science, theology, and Christian education, can certainly bring more clarity to the meaning of Christian librarianship. Future research should develop further the five areas of integration discussed—collection development, reference services,

bibliographic instruction, research and publication, and management. In addition, it should probe into other areas of librarianship—particularly bibliographic control—to determine how they might be used to promote the theistic world view.[61] Such research should discuss how Christian librarians can advance the Christian world view in the context of postmodern theory and evangelical diversity.

Christian librarianship abounds with opportunities for ministry. Christian librarians minister to faculty and students who need access to information. By extension, they serve church and society by contributing to the preparation of their leaders. They serve the cause of Christian scholarship directly and indirectly in many ways. Christian librarians play a meaningful part in the process of Christian higher education. They have a role to play, a ministry to perform, a calling to fulfill.

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[1]To the author's knowledge, the only book on Christian librarianship ever published was a 96-page anthology of essays compiled by the Librarians' Christian Fellowship: Graham Hedges, ed., *Issues in Librarianship 2: The Debate Continues* (Leicester, England: UCCF for LCF, 1996).

[2]J. Ray Doerksen, "The Y Factor," *The Christian Librarian* [U.S.A.] 40 (September 1997): 90.

[3]A survey of theological librarians affiliated with the American Theological Library Association revealed that more than two-thirds of respondents viewed theological librarianship as a vocational calling (Rashelle S. Karp and Andrew J. Keck, "Theological Librarianship: Toward a Profile of a Profession," *College & Research Libraries* 57 [January 1996]: 40).

[4]A survey of Christian librarians conducted in the 1980s showed that a significant number of Christian librarians doubt that "Christians have a distinctive view of librarianship" (Graham Hedges and Geraldine Pote, "How Distinctive are Christian Librarians?," in *Issues in Librarianship 2: The Debate Continues*, ed. Graham Hedges [Leicester, England: UCCF for LCF, 1996], 13-14).